

A poetry explication is a relatively short analysis which describes the possible meanings and relationships of the words, images, and other small units that make up a poem. Writing an explication is an effective way for a reader to connect a poem's plot and conflicts with its structural features. This handout reviews some of the important techniques of approaching and writing a poetry explication, and includes parts of two sample explications.

PREPARING TO WRITE THE EXPLICATION

Consider the poem as a dramatic situation in which a speaker addresses an audience or another character. In this way, begin your analysis by identifying and describing the speaking voice or voices, the conflicts or ideas, and the language used in the poem.

The large issues

- Determine the basic design of the poem by considering the who, what, when, where, and why of the dramatic situation.
- What is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address, or question?
- Who is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
- What happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc.?
- When does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day?
- Where is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.
- Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

The details

To analyze the design of the poem, we must focus on the poem's parts, namely how the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. By concentrating on the parts, we develop our understanding of the poem's structure, and we gather support and evidence for our interpretations. Some of the details we should consider include the following:

- **Form:** Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, sestina, etc.)? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form?
- **Rhetoric:** How does the speaker make particular statements? Does the rhetoric seem odd in any way? Why? Consider the predicates and what they reveal about the speaker.
- **Syntax:** Consider the subjects, verbs, and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do any statements have convoluted or vague syntax?
- **Vocabulary:** Why does the poet choose one word over another in each line? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add other meanings to the line? Use the Oxford English Dictionary as a resource.

The patterns

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain patterns to develop which provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker's state of mind, or the poet's use of details. Some of the most common patterns include the following:

- **Rhetorical Patterns:** Look for statements that follow the same format.
- **Rhyme:** Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words.

- Patterns of Sound: Alliteration and assonance create sound effects and often cluster significant words.
- Visual Patterns: How does the poem look on the page?
- Rhythm and Meter: Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and his/her language.

WRITING THE EXPLICATION

3rd person, formal, objective

The explication should follow the same format as the preparation: begin with the large issues and basic design of the poem and work through each line to the more specific details and patterns.

The first paragraph

The first paragraph should present the large issues; it should inform the reader which conflicts are dramatized and should describe the dramatic situation of the speaker. The explication does not require a formal introductory paragraph; the writer should simply start explicating immediately. According to Professor William Harmon, the foolproof way to begin any explication is with the following sentence: “This poem dramatizes the conflict between ...” Such a beginning ensures that you will introduce the major conflict or theme in the poem and organize your explication accordingly.

Here is an example. A student’s explication of Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” might begin in the following way:

- Title
- Author
- Speaker
- Subject
- theme

Wordsworth’s poem, “Composed upon Westminster Bridge”, dramatizes the conflict between appearance and reality, particularly as this conflict relates to what the speaker seems to say and what he really says. From Westminster Bridge, the speaker looks at London at sunrise, and he explains that all people should be struck by such a beautiful scene. The speaker notes that the city is silent, and he points to several specific objects, naming them only in general terms: “Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples” (6). After describing the “glittering” aspect of these objects, he asserts that these city places are just as beautiful in the morning as country places like “valley, rock, or hill” (8,10). Finally, after describing his deep feeling of calmness, the speaker notes how the “houses seem asleep” and that “all that mighty heart is lying still” (13, 14). In this way, the speaker seems to say simply that London looks beautiful in the morning.

The next paragraphs

The next paragraphs should expand the discussion of the conflict by focusing on details of form, rhetoric, syntax, and vocabulary. In these paragraphs, the writer should explain the poem line by line in terms of these details, and he or she should incorporate important elements of rhyme, rhythm, and meter during this discussion.

The student’s explication continues with a topic sentence that directs the discussion of the first five lines:

However, the poem begins with several oddities that suggest the speaker is saying more than what he seems to say initially. For example, the poem is an Italian sonnet and follows the abbaabbacddcd rhyme scheme. The fact that the poet chooses to write a sonnet about London in an Italian form suggests that what he says may not be actually praising the city. Also, the rhetoric of the first two lines seems awkward compared to a normal speaking voice: “Earth has not anything to show more fair. / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by” (1-2). The odd syntax continues when the poet personifies the city: “This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning” (4-5). Here, the city wears the morning’s beauty, so it is not the city but the morning that is beautiful ...

The conclusion??

The explication has no formal concluding paragraph; do not simply restate the main points of the introduction! The end of the explication should focus on sound effects or visual patterns as the final element of asserting an explanation. Or, as does the undergraduate here, the writer may choose simply to stop writing when he or she reaches the end of the poem:

The poem ends with a vague statement: “And all that mighty heart is lying still!” In this line, the city’s heart could be dead, or it could be simply deceiving the one observing the scene. In this way, the poet reinforces the conflict between the appearance of the city in the morning and what such a scene and his words actually reveal.

Tips to keep in mind

Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as the speaker” or “the poet.” For example, do not write, “In this poem, Wordsworth says that London is beautiful in the morning.” However, you can write, “In this poem, Wordsworth presents a speaker who...” We cannot absolutely identify Wordsworth with the speaker of the poem, so it is more accurate to talk about “the speaker” or “the poet” in an explication.

- Use the present tense when writing the explication. The poem, as a work of literature, continues to exist!

To avoid unnecessary uses of the verb “to be” in your compositions, the following list suggests some verbs:

Dramatizes	presents	illustrates	characterizes	underlines	asserts
Posits	enacts	connects	portrays	contrasts	juxtaposes
Suggests	implies	shows	addresses	emphasizes	stresses
Accentuates	enables	exposes	symbolizes	reveals	

Tone words for higher level analysis:

Conflicted	critical	arrogant	whimsical	detached	angry	bitter
Pretentious	fanciful	threatening	condescending	indifferent	irate	tolerant
Patronizing	flippant	outraged	nostalgic	candid	indignant	accepting
Sentimental	ambiguous	regretful	scholarly	perplexed	amused	optimistic
Remorseful	ironic	apologetic	moralistic	ecstatic	inspired	humorous
Sarcastic	contentious	respectful	sardonic	content	mocking	joyous
Disappointed	sympathetic	compassionate	disdainful	passionate	interested	pessimistic
Contemptuous	melancholic	restrained	urgent	impartial	serious	tragic
Biting	mournful	ominous	cynical	poignant	clinical	vindictive
Apprehensive	skeptical	somber	foreboding	wry	admiring	playful
Contemplative	derogatory	disapproving	disdainful	sharp	reverent	sincere
Lighthearted	exuberant	elegiac	truthful/honest	critical	fearful	flippant

DO NOT USE: good, bad, weak, calm, negative, positive,